

Violence in the Workplace

FACTS

Workplace violence is violence or the threat of violence against a worker occurring while the worker is performing his or her duties during the normal workday. It can happen inside or outside the office and be inflicted by strangers, co-workers, or patients and their families or visitors. It includes threats, verbal abuse, and physical assault.

The incidence of violence in the United States is increasing. There are several reasons why this is true.

- » There are more handguns and other weapons among patients, families, and their friends. It is estimated that as many as 25% of the population have handguns or other weapons.
- » There are more people discharged to the community with mental illnesses.
- » There is an increased presence of gang members in most cities.
- » There is increased abuse of drugs and alcohol.

REASONS HOME HEALTH AIDES ARE ESPECIALLY AT RISK FOR VIOLENCE:

There are numerous factors that increase a person's risk for workplace violence. You, as a home health aide, encounter many of those factors in doing your work because:

- » You are in frequent contact with the public, not only at your job in the home, but traveling to and from your assignments.
- » You work alone.
- » You work in community-based settings.
- » You are often driving late in the evening or in the early morning hours.
- » You may often work in neighborhoods considered to be high-crime areas.

For all these reasons you know that you are at a greater risk for violence in your job than many other people. Therefore, it is very important that you are constantly aware of that possibility. While there is no guarantee that you will never be a victim of violence, there are many things you can do to reduce that risk.

PREPARE BEFORE YOU LEAVE HOME:

1. Do not take a purse with you. If necessary, carry only a minimal amount of money or a credit card and keep everything locked in a glove box, or the trunk of your car. Do not carry them with you.
2. Put your identification badge in a pocket until you are at a patient's home.
3. Keep your car in good running order with safe tires, a good battery, and plenty of gas.
4. Review your schedule for the day. Make sure you know how to get to each location. If this is a first-time visit, call the patient to confirm exactly where the house or apartment is located. It's also a good idea to know where the nearest fire or police stations are in the areas you will be visiting.

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5. Securely pin a spare car key inside a pocket in case your keys are stolen, or you accidentally lock yourself out of your car.
6. Check the mirror. Make certain you are not wearing jewelry that looks expensive or tempting to a thief. Avoid wearing chains or necklaces around your neck that could possibly be used by someone to choke you.
7. Mentally remind yourself that you could possibly become a victim, and that you will be alert all day, in every place you go, and that you will constantly observe the people around you.
8. Develop a look of purpose and self-confidence that you will keep all day.

PRECAUTIONS IN THE CAR:

- » When you leave home, make certain that your supplies are close at hand to reduce the amount of time you will have to spend getting them out of the car.
- » Have the car key ready when walking to your car.
- » Check the seats and floor before unlocking the car.
- » Lock the car as soon as you get into it and always drive with the doors locked.
- » Do not sit in your car to chart.
- » Never transport anyone in your car, not even a member of the patient's family.
- » Never stop to assist someone whose car appears to have broken down.
- » If you are being followed, drive to the nearest police or fire station and honk your horn until someone comes out. If that is not possible, drive to the nearest busy gas station, or other area where there are people around.
- » If someone approaches your car at an intersection, do not roll down the window. If you feel threatened, honk your horn.
- » If your car breaks down, stay inside and put on the hazard lights. If someone approaches, roll down the window very slightly and ask the person to call the police for you. Do not get out of your car.
- » Park as close as possible to your patient's residence in a well-lighted area.
- » Look around before getting out of your car.
- » Take only what you require for the visit as you leave the car, and lock it immediately when you get out.
- » If police or fire departments block off the street on which the patient lives, go to a safe area and telephone your supervisor.

PRECAUTIONS WALKING TO THE PATIENT'S HOME:

- » Walk with confidence at a steady pace that indicates you know where you are going.
- » Be alert to the people around you.

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- » Avoid dark, deserted areas. Never take shortcuts through alleys or vacant lots.
- » Try to stay in well-lighted areas.
- » Walk in the center of the sidewalk, away from doorways and lines of parked cars.
- » Never approach a parked car if someone calls out to you. Reply from a distance.
- » If a stranger approaches you while you are walking, be courteous and respectful. Keep eye contact with the person, stay several feet away, and make it clear that you are expected somewhere nearby. Try not to appear frightened or nervous. If the person asks for money, explain that you are a home health aide and do not carry any.
- » Avoid groups of people gathered outside. Cross the street if necessary until you are past them.
- » If you feel you are in trouble, attract attention any way you can. Yell "Fire!" Make lots of noise, blow a whistle or activate a noise alarm if you have one.

PRECAUTIONS IN THE PATIENT'S HOME OR APARTMENT:

- » Look before you enter an elevator. Once on it, stand nearest the door and control panel. If someone enters and you feel unsafe, get out. If you feel unsafe in the elevator, press the floor buttons and get off as soon as possible.
- » Avoid using stairwells in high-rise apartments.
- » If there is no answer at the door of the patient's home or apartment, do not knock on stranger's doors to see if they know where the patient might be.
- » Even if the patient wants you to, never just "knock and walk in." Tell the patient you will not enter until they either come to the door, or verbally call out to you.
- » If there are strange people in the home or apartment and they appear intoxicated or verbally abusive, leave immediately and telephone the office when you can safely do so.
- » Notify the supervisor immediately if you observe openly displayed guns or other weapons in the home.
- » If you find an unusual situation outside a patient's apartment or home (such as a large group of people or individuals who are fighting), go back to your car and call your supervisor as soon as you safely can.

RECOGNIZING SOME WARNING SIGNS OF VIOLENCE:

Stay alert and pay close attention to what people say and do. Be aware that anyone can become violent under the right circumstances. This might include anyone on the street, your patients, families or visitors, or even co-workers in the office. Not everyone will show warning signs that he or she may become violent. However, there are often some warning signs you should watch for. They include:

- » Being intoxicated or apparently under the influence of drugs
- » Using an angry or threatening tone of voice

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- » Making threats
- » Being “out of control” such as shouting, screaming, or cursing
- » Nervous pacing or extreme restlessness
- » Clenching fists or tightly holding on to an object that could be used as a weapon
- » Openly displaying a gun or other weapon
- » Appearing to hear voices when there is no one else around

ACTIONS TO CONSIDER WHEN SOMEONE SHOWS WARNING SIGNS OF VIOLENCE:

While there is no set formula for the best method of handling people who appear to be threatening violence, some actions are usually recommended.

1. Stay calm and maintain self-control.
2. Don't turn your back on the person, but always try to keep several feet away. If you are in a home, do not let the person back you into a corner — move in different ways, preferably closer to the door.
3. Listen to the person and do not act disrespectfully. Don't stare, but maintain steady eye contact.
4. Do not use an angry tone of voice. Talk slowly and softly in a non-threatening manner.
5. If you are in a patient's home, try to divert the person. Offer them a drink of water or some food.
6. Have several thoughts in mind. Do whatever you can to help the person calm down.
7. If the person demands your supply bag, or anything you have, give it to the person.

KEY POINTS TO KEEP IN MIND:

- » Always be alert and take all possible precautions.
- » Learn and follow your agency's safety policy.
- » Know how and where to report and document the information if you feel there are safety concerns in the home.
- » Learn and follow your agency's guidelines on reporting your travel schedule for the day.
- » Never remain in a home or apartment if you feel unsafe. Leave immediately and telephone your supervisor as soon as you safely can.
- » If you are the victim of violence at work, immediately seek medical attention. Afterwards, seek all the help that your agency provides. This may include talking with someone in the employee assistance program (EAP). Be aware that you should not minimize the effect the violence may have had on you. Do not ignore or brush aside the opportunity to talk about it to the proper people who may be able to help you. Don't hide your feelings from them, or pretend it didn't affect you.

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CASE STUDY: PREVENTING VIOLENCE

George is an experienced home health aide. He is a large man and never feels that he is in danger, since he is confident he could overpower anyone who might attack him. He thinks it is too inconvenient to secure his wallet in his car, so he carries it in his hip pocket. He knows the city well, so he doesn't think it is necessary to look up the addresses and directions to new patients. He has a thick, gold chain necklace that he never takes off. He always seems to be behind schedule so he often takes shortcuts through alleys. He doesn't have time to wait for the elevator in high-rise apartments, so he runs up the stairs. If a patient does not open the door, he doesn't want to waste time calling the office so he's likely to knock on the doors of neighbors to see whether they know the whereabouts of the patient.

Miriam is a new home health aide. She has always been fearful of the inner city. She carefully prepares her route and makes certain she knows how to locate every patient she will visit. When she gets out of the car, she checks it several times, spending several minutes standing outside her unlocked car. Because she is so fearful, she walks rather timidly down the sidewalk, nervously glancing around her as though she is uncertain where she is going. When she sees other people, she is afraid to look in their direction, even if they speak to her in passing. She always asks her patients if she can just knock and then come into the house or apartment, since standing outside the door always frightens her.

THINK ABOUT IT

What do you think are some of the things George does that potentially make him a victim of violence? What are some of the changes he should make? What should he keep doing?

What do you think are some of the things Miriam does that may make her a target for violent crime? What are some of the things she should change? What does she do well?

Think about the differences between being alert and aware and being seen as uncertain and weak.

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DIRECTIONS: READ EACH QUESTION CAREFULLY. THEN, DETERMINE THE BEST ANSWER. CHECK THE CORRESPONDING BOX ON YOUR ANSWER SHEET. DO NOT WRITE ON THIS POST-TEST.

1. Which of the following is not likely to be a warning sign of violent behavior?
 - a. Crying softly
 - b. Using a loud and angry tone of voice
 - c. Approaching with clenched fists
 - d. Pacing about with extreme restlessness

2. Which of the following actions should not be done if you are faced with a person showing warning signs of violent behavior?
 - a. Keeping several feet away from the person
 - b. Speaking in a soft slow voice
 - c. Staring at the person and telling him or her, "You don't scare me."
 - d. Listening to the person and maintaining eye contact

3. Which of the following likely makes a home health aide at greater risk for workplace violence?
 - a. Working alone
 - b. Working in a community-based setting
 - c. Being in frequent contact with the public
 - d. All of the above

4. There are many things you can do to reduce your chances of being a victim of violence.
 - a. True
 - b. False

5. What should you do when you are walking down the street?
 - a. Walk confidently at a pace that indicates you know where you are going.
 - b. Walk very near the curb, as far away from buildings as possible.
 - c. Take shortcuts through alleys so you will get to the home more quickly.
 - d. Never make any eye contact with people on the street.

6. Which of the following may put you at risk when you are driving?
 - a. Looking around before you unlock your car and get out of it
 - b. Not opening the window if someone approaches your car at an intersection
 - c. Driving with your windows up and your doors locked
 - d. Keeping your purse on the front passenger seat so you can reach it easily

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7. If you think you are being followed in your car, the best thing to do is to pull over and let the person drive on.
- True
 - False
8. Which of the following is not considered workplace violence?
- Being verbally abused by a patient or family member
 - Being threatened by someone on the street while you are walking to a patient's home
 - Being assaulted by a co-worker
 - Getting into a fight with your wife or husband before going to work.
9. What action may put you at greater risk of violence?
- Carrying a purse with a shoulder strap and making sure your identification badge is visible when you are walking down the street
 - Crossing the street if necessary to avoid a group of people loitering at a corner.
 - Having your car key ready when walking to your car so you can unlock it quickly
 - Leaving a home immediately if you feel threatened by a patient, visitor, or family member
10. What should you do if you are a victim of violence in the workplace?
- Immediately report the incident according to agency policy.
 - Seek immediate medical attention if you are injured.
 - Be aware that you may need help in sorting out your feelings.
 - All of the above

- END -

